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ABSTRACT

To determine the effects of the increasing enrollment of women and the greater mix in the age composition of student bodies in colleges, questionnaire responses were obtained from approximately 6,500 students in 27 nationally scattered junior and community colleges. Comparisons were made of the college perceptions and experiences of the women and older students with those of men and of younger students. Three age groups were used--under 22, 22 to 29, and older than 29. The responses showed that: (1) sex differences were negligible in more than 100 items concerning academic experiences; only in post-college plans did men respond differently, reporting proportionately greater uncertainty than did women their age; (2) age differences were found to be substantial and linear with respect to academic performance, satisfaction with classes, preference for student- or instructor-directed instruction, and program uncertainty. The older the student, the more likely he is to (1) be in no academic difficulty; (2) be satisfied with his instructors, responsive, and agreeable; (3) prefer instructor-directed learning; and (4) have definite plans as to what he will do after leaving college. Compared with the older student, those of college age have many academic problems, see their classes as lacking challenge, prefer student-planned and student-controlled learning situations, and are uncertain about their programs. (Student Joint Response to Item Groups and Description of Student Grouping are provided.) (DB)

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Effects of the Changing Age and Sex Composition of College Student Bodies*

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The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education has recommended equalizing educational opportunities by encouraging increased enrollment of women and a greater mix in the age composition of student bodies. Both these recommendations are already being realized to some extent. The proportions of women and of entering students older than 22 have been rising slowly but steadily. In the past decade, the numbers of men students 22 and older have nearly doubled, but the numbers of women students that age have almost tripled. Roughly one-third of students currently enrolled in college are 22 years of age or older. By 1985, over four out of ten college students will be at least 22, and one-fourth of those enrolled in colleges will be over 25.

The effects of these changes in student body composition can be estimated by examining the college perceptions and experiences of these relatively new and expanding groups of students in relation to those of men and of younger students. The data for these comparisons are the responses of about 6,500 students in 27 nationally scattered junior and community colleges to a set of items asking them to describe and evaluate their college experiences.

Sex differences were found to be negligible in more than 100 items concerning academic experiences. Only in relating college program to

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post-college plans do men respond differently than women, men reporting proportionately greater uncertainty than women their age.

The recent trend of single-sex institutions to become coed should not create much disturbance in the instructional activities of the institution. Men and women apparently respond similarly to instructors and instruction. A rising proportion of older students, however, could substantially affect the instructional climate.

Age differences were found to be substantial and linear with respect to academic performance, satisfaction with classes, preference for student- or instructor-directed instruction, and program uncertainty. On page 5 are shown the responses of junior and community college students of three age groups--under 22, 22 to 29, and older than 29--to these four aspects of instructional climate. For each area students are identified by their joint response to three questionnaire items; the item sets are listed on pages 6 and 7.

The older the student, the more likely he is to (1) be in no academic difficulty, (2) be satisfied with his instructors, responsive, and agreeable, (3) prefer instructor-directed learning, wanting the instructor to lay out his work for him, which he then does without needing or asking for more help from the instructor or other students, and (4) have definite plans about what he will do after he leaves college.

According to this data, many colleges in the immediate future perhaps can expect greater numbers of students who approach classwork and college experiences in a business-like manner--determined to be prepared adequately for skill certification or further education; conscientious about class attendance and assignments; and uninterested in after-hours life on campus, their out-of-class time spent at home with their families

or at jobs. There will be more students who care not whether an instructor is congenial or can "rap" with them, who simply want to be acquainted with subject matter. Instructors will have more freedom from student demands in conducting their classes however they want, but they will be under greater pressure to do a good job presenting and explaining the course content. Older students won't want to waste their money or time on course requirements that could just as easily be satisfied with independent study through credit by examination or by correspondence.

Compared to older students, those of college age have many academic problems, see their classes as lacking challenge, prefer student planned and controlled learning situations, and are uncertain about their programs. The few older students reporting these problems and preferences have excuses and perspectives vastly different from students under 22.

College-age students in academic difficulty are bitter about being advised by dumb or insensitive counselors and being overloaded with too many required courses. Older students in academic difficulty simply run out of time preparing for class and studying for tests.

Students under 22 who feel they aren't getting anything out of their classes want to spend their time in more active learning roles--study sessions and spontaneous discussions with fellow students and the faculty. Older students who are dissatisfied and unchallenged by classes like lectures but believe the teaching is geared too low and paced too slow for them.

Among the young student-centered there are at least two types of students. (1) Some want responsibility for their own academic development and freedom from instructor demands in fulfilling course requirements even if it requires more work. (2) Others have a mixture of self-reliance

and dependence on the instructor, wanting the instructor to accommodate their desires but also relying on out-of-class help from the instructor and other students. Among the older students who desire student-centered learning situations, past experience with military service or other group living/working arrangements and strong commitment to such things as civil and women's rights stimulate classroom demands for equal say in how and what they learn.

Program uncertainty is serious and painful to many college-age students, particularly men, who spend hours worrying about what they should do with their lives, pestering counselors and other students about what courses they should take, and wondering whether any particular course is worth the effort. Older students without definite college plans seem to prefer it that way, taking occasional courses in subjects that appeal to them and having no interest in purposeful work toward a degree.

* * *

This discussion of age differences in approaching college instruction is based on 1971 data. To some extent every person is a product of the times in which he grows up. And, thus, it could very well be that 30-year-olds and 20-year-olds will be much more similar (or different) in the future than they are today.

STUDENT JOINT RESPONSE TO ITEM GROUPS

Percent of Age Group

	Under 22 N=4456	22 to 29 N=1403	Over 29 N=616
Academic Trouble			
In academic trouble	36	28	18
Not in academic trouble	10	16	27
Lack of Challenge and Interest in Classes			
Unchallenged by classes	43	34	17
Satisfied with classes	4	11	26
Student-centered Instruction			
Student-centered preference	21	15	10
Instructor-directed preference	20	28	42
Program Uncertainty			
Being uncertain about college program	30	19	9
Men* uncertain	18	16	5
Women uncertain	12	3	4
Feeling certain about college program	10	19	39
Men certain	4	13	16
Women certain	6	6	23

* In the total sample 55 percent of students under 22, 77 percent of the 22 to 29 year olds, and 48 percent of students over 30 are male.

DESCRIPTION OF STUDENT GROUPING

Questionnaire Items Grouped by Factor	Factor Loading
Academic Trouble	
During the past two weeks I have . . .	
1. felt left behind in a course	.61*
2. been unable to understand what was being taught in class	.58
During the present term I have . . .	
3. had an instructor who could not explain things in a way students could understand	.48

In academic trouble: student responds "at least once" to all three items
Not in academic trouble: student responds "not at all" to all three items

Lack of Challenge and Interest in Classes	
During the past two weeks I have . . .	
1. been in a class session where the instructor was no more help than just reading the text would have been	.61
2. been bored in class	.60
3. been in a class that just went over material I already knew	.51

Unchallenged: student responds "at least once" to all three items
Satisfied: student responds "not at all" to all three items

* Factor loadings are the correlation coefficients between each item and the factor that represents the common meaning of these three items and several others.

Questionnaire Items Grouped by Factor	Factor Loading

Student-Centered Instruction

I would like . . .

1. more classes without texts or assignments, organized around informal discussions .78

The faculty should . . .

2. stay with topics that have caught the class's interest even if they don't cover the planned amount of ground in the course .56

3. work out the course content with the students in each class, even if some courses don't mesh very well with the next ones in the sequence .47

Student-centered: student responds "yes" or "definitely yes" to all three items
Instructor-directed: student responds "no", "definitely not" or "?" to all three items

Program Uncertainty

In general . . .

1. if I knew better what I wanted to do I could get more out of college .76

2. I'm pretty sure about what I want to do when I finish here -.65

During the present term I have . . .

3. wondered whether the courses I was taking were really what I wanted .45

Uncertain: student responds "yes" or "definitely yes" to first item, "no", "definitely not" or "?" to second item, and "at least once" to third item
Certain: student responds "no" or "definitely not" to first item, "yes" or "definitely yes" to second item, and "not at all" to third item

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